

Education as the basis for social development

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It is interesting that the subject of this panel is the link between education and social, not economic development. Traditionally, as for instance for the classic sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, education was always considered as central component for the transmission of social values and the maintenance of social cohesion, and, in the modern nation states, as the place for the consolidation of national culture and identity. The economic implications of education, if any, were considered as a side effect. For this reason, education became a kind of secondary subject in the development literature, pushed aside by other considerations, such as economic growth, investment, trade, and political institutions.

More recently, the economists developed the theories of human capital, and started to stress and try to measure the economic impact and benefits of education for economic growth. The economist's views were very important to bring education back to the top of the agenda of governments and multilateral agencies, and this dovetailed nicely with the interests of the people involved in education institutions, who saw this renewed interest as an opportunity to bring more resources and support to an ever growing and money-hungry education establishment.

It should be said that sociologists and educators never adhered completely to the economists' views. For sociologists, the obvious role of education as a channel for social mobility and the diffusion of skills and values was associated with its other role, of creating and maintaining social stratification and new forms of social privilege based on cultural and professional credentials. For the educators, the links between education and economic development led to the threat that education institutions would cease to be governed autonomously by educators and academics, and come under the scrutinizing lenses and of economic authorities and economic-minded decision makers. The development of quality assurance mechanisms, both for higher and basic education, although not limited to narrow concerns of economic efficacy and efficiency, was perceived as the most clear evidence of this threat, and the fact that they acquired preeminence during the Margaret Thatcher period in England reinforced this condition.

The failure of many countries to achieve economic development in the last decades in spite of all kinds of economic reforms led to a renewed interest in the social and cultural dimensions that could be the

precondition for such development, leading to the emergence of a new concept for the economists, of social capital, together with the rediscovery of institutions and history. In this process, the old notion that education institutions should play a role in providing the cultural and moral "cement" of society, and not just skills for the labor market, came back to the fore.

Social capital theories come from two very different perspectives in the ideological spectrum. One extreme is best expressed, perhaps, in the works of Francis Fukuyama and, in education, Allan Bloom. The idea is that, for the economy to grow, people should trust each other, and the trust is a matter of shared values and social institutions. Therefore, the main role of education institutions should be the transmission of traditional values required for social cohesion (associated with family, religion and nation), from economic virtues would follow. The other extreme is represented, among others, by the proposals of higher education reform being put forward these days by the Brazilian Marxist Ministry of Education, Tarso Genro. The main reasons for the reform, according to the Ministry, is to link the University to a National Project, to organize the universities as a Republic for the open dialog for the production of knowledge and social inclusion, and to put limits and curtail the trends for privatization of higher education, through the strict control of private institutions and prohibition against the presence of foreigners in the control of higher education institutions:

- Vínculo da universidade ao projeto de nação, como elemento estratégico na busca de um novo modelo de desenvolvimento, central para a consolidação de uma nação soberana, democrática e inclusiva
- Republicanização da universidade, como um espaço público e plural de produção de conhecimento e saberes e de diálogo e interação com a sociedade civil;
 - Constituição de um marco regulatório orientador de regras claras, precisas e permanentes que promovam a qualificação contínua do sistema federal de ensino e que impeçam a mercantilização da educação. (from the second version of the proposal for higher education reform, June 2005)

Article 8 of the proposed legislation lists eight functions for higher education, and none of them is to prepare the students for the labor market, or to contribute directly to economic growth. Article 9 has 14 articles about the social commitment ("compromisso social") of higher education institutions, some of them dealing with the need to interact with society and the world of labor (item IV) and dissemination and transfer of knowledge and technology (item III), among others like democratization of access (item X), democratic management of higher education institutions (item XI) and promotion of citizenship and human rights (item XII). So, economic functions are not completely discarded, but are secondary to other objectives.

The proposal has many articles about the need of quality assurance of higher education institutions, but, for public institutions, the top assurance mechanism is self-evaluation, while, for the private sector (which responds for two thirds of higher education enrollment), there are strict procedures for accreditation and re-

accreditation. In practice, this rejection of the “mercantilist” aspects of higher education has led to the dismantling of the most creative assessment procedure for higher education in Brazil of the 1990s, the National Courses Graduation Exam (“provão”), replaced by a much weaker assessment of student achievement¹

The shared emphasis of conservatives like Allan Bloom and Marxists like Tarso Genro on the social functions of education does not mean that they see education the same way. For the conservatives, education institutions should be hierarchical, based on the authority of the cultivated elites. For the leftists, education institutions should be communitarian, based on the empowerment of students and teacher’s unions, and linked with organized social movements and grassroots communities.

There are two main questions that follow from this renewed emphasis on the social, against the economic dimensions of education. This first is whether they really have a point, that education institutions should be mostly concerned with values and their social function; and the second is about the consequences of this new emphasis, when it is transformed into actual policies, as intended by the Brazilian education authorities.

Regarding the first point, my tentative answer is yes; education should not be reduced to the simple training and preparation of people for the job market. I doubt, however, that there is any education system that adheres fully to a market-oriented ideology, although some institutions obviously do. The main issue is not the opposition between social and economic values and functions, but the conflict between monolithic, totalitarian institutions and pluralist ones. It is impossible to continue to insist on the traditional model of hierarchical education institutions, strictly controlled by academic authorities and teaching the values of a stable and consolidated culture, when there is no consensus about what this culture should be; when there are higher education institutions of all kinds, responding to different motivations, values and interests; and when the student body is so much larger and heterogeneous than in the past. On the other extreme, the emphasis on “communitarian” and equity values can also lead to ideologically uniform institutions, with little room for the traditional values of culture and higher learning. Pluralism, with a healthy predominance of academic cultural values over ideology and over the mobilization of disguised or not so disguised interests groups, is a difficult balance to strike, but it is not impossible, if one thinks on higher education as being provided by a plurality of institutions, with different motivations and sources of support, and being attended by different social groups.

Regarding the second issue, one of the main consequences of the new emphasis on the social, cultural and moral aspects of education may be the weakening of the external assessment mechanisms that have emerged in the last decades, with a renewed emphasis on institutional self-rule. However, the development

¹ See, for an analysis of this new assessment, <https://archive.org/details/OEnigmaDoEnade>

of general standards and the introduction of external assessment of education institutions was not a simple consequence of the economists' encroachment on education, but also an effort to make education institutions more responsive not only to the needs of the market, but also to their own values. In Latin America, but not only there, education institutions tend to be self-indulgent, difficult to respond to the changing conditions and needs from their societies, and expensive, and they need to be prodded from outside to perform as they should. Here again, the challenge is to find a proper balance between institutional autonomy, which is necessary for the fostering of cultural and social values, and accountability, which requires external oversight.